

## The Rhymer's Travels

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE prophet Thomas the Rhymer lived from about 1225 to about 1297 and came from Erceldoun (now Earlston) in the Scottish Borders. In my last article of 1997 I tried to show that he would have been a speaker of Norman French, Anglian (now called English or Scots), Gaelic, and perhaps also Cumbric (now called Welsh), as during his childhood in Erceldoun all of these were local languages in varying stages of advancement or decay.

The Middle English 'Romance of Thomas the Rhymer' shows him entering fairyland, the entrance being under the triple Eildon Hills. This reputed visit to the otherworld is what underpinned his reputation as a seer. I pointed out that the 'Romance' as we have it is thought not to date from as early as Thomas's time, and that his connection with the ancient story which lies at the heart of the 'Romance' would not have been as its hero but as its collector and translator.

Thomas would have known the last Cumbric speakers of the district. He would have heard and noted from them their old pagan stories about how a mortal man met the Queen of the Fairies when hunting on Eildonside at Hallowe'en, made love to her and experienced the joys of the otherworld for what seemed to him like one night, but was in reality a period of years. Such stories are commonplace in Irish, in Scottish Gaelic, and in Welsh.

I also pointed out that 'Rhymer' seems to have been Thomas's surname. In other words, he belonged to a family whose hereditary trade it was to make things memorable by putting them in rhyme. I believe that he would have put the old Welsh story into rhyme in his own languages — probably Gaelic, Middle English (Scots, if you prefer), and French. And he would have done what poets of the learned variety have always done and still do today. He would have gone on tour.

Now I don't think for a moment that Thomas would have pretended to have entered the otherworld himself. But I do think that he must have possessed the gift (or affliction) of the second sight, perhaps inherited from the same line of descent that could have given him the Gaelic language. I see no reason to doubt that Gaelic and the tendency to second sight would have come together in the thirteenth century Borders in the same odd way that they do in the twentieth century Highlands and Islands. As his prophetic revelations were conspicuously secular in nature, it would have been difficult for him to claim that they were obtained through prayer. His visions could only, therefore, have been seen as one end of a mysterious line of communication whose other end was in the Celtic otherworld.

In the High Middle Ages, with that hugely powerful Cistercian, the Abbot of Melrose, breathing down his neck, that could have been uncomfortable. Another reason for going on tour.

Where did Thomas go? There are two answers to that question. One takes him due *west* as far as he could go. The other takes him due *north* as far as he could go. Both bring him to Gaelic-speaking territory. One is the evidence that links him with the friary of Fail, the other is the geographical distribution of the prophecies ascribed to him. Let me take Fail first, even though it seems to belong mainly to a later period of his life.

Fail is near Tarbolton in Ayrshire, not far inland from Ayr. In the thirteenth century the languages there would have been the same as in Earlston, but in different proportions, with Gaelic more prominent and Anglian less so. Melrose Abbey had large possessions in the neighbourhood, but Fail itself belonged to the Trinitarians or 'Red Friars', to whose other house of Soutra (a few miles north of Erceldoun) Thomas's property was bequeathed on 2 November 1294. One theory has it that Thomas ended his days at Fail after transferring his estate in Erceldoun to his son. The evidence for it is Blind Harry's epic poem 'Wallace', composed 1470-92. Describing an incident that took place before 1297, Harry depicts Thomas visiting Fail frequently in the company of the 'Minister' (the head of the Trinitarian Order in Scotland).

*Thomas Rhymer into the Faile was then,  
With the Minister, which was a worthy man;  
He used oft to that religious place;  
The people deemed of wit he meikle can,  
And so he told, though that they bless or ban,  
In rule of war whether they tint or wan;  
Which happened sooth in many divers case,  
I cannot say by wrong or righteousness,  
It may be deemed by division of grace.*

So Harry refers to the fundamental dilemma concerning the source of Thomas's prophecies: was it 'wrong' (paganism, black arts, Celtic otherworld) or 'righteousness' (prayer, divine inspiration, Catholic orthodoxy)? And he gives him the benefit of the doubt.

The prophecies ascribed by tradition to Thomas, and printed in many editions from 1603 on, refer very specifically to places and families. It would be possible to plot these places and families on a map. The result would be a map of Thomas's 'cult'. As far as I know this has never been tried, but I think the general lines of the 'cult' are clear enough in any case. Insofar as it was expressed in Lowland Scots (I will leave Gaelic till next time), it lay roughly in a band from the area of Fail south to Wigtown and Annandale in the south-west, through the eastern Borders, the eastern half of Lothian, Fife, the town but not the county of Perth, Angus, the

Mearns, Aberdeenshire and Moray, with an outlier in Cromarty. West of Moray it was eventually eclipsed (though not entirely, as we will see) by the cult of the Brahan Seer.

Thomas's 'cult' was particularly strong in Aberdeenshire, nowhere more it seems than in Buchan. Inverugie in Buchan had a 'Rhymer's Stone', as does Earlston itself, and tradition claimed that Thomas had uttered his prophecies from it. It was built into St Fergus's Church in 1763, but a century afterwards the field in which it had stood was still known as 'Tammass' Stane'. Thomas is claimed to have said:

*Inverugie by the sea,  
Lordless shall thy lands be,  
And underneath thy hearthstane  
The tod [fox] shall bring her bairns hame.*

An excellent explanation for the strength of Thomas's cult in Aberdeenshire was given by John Geddie in 1920 in his book 'Thomas the Rymour and his Rhymes'. The next parish north-east of the Rhymer's Tower in Earlston, he pointed out, is Gordon. On the border between Earlston and Gordon parishes is Huntly Wood, from where the Eildons can be seen, and this, rather than any spot on the slopes of the Eildons themselves, may well be the place where the 'Romance' opens:

*In a land as I was lent,  
At the graying of the day,  
Ay alone as I went  
In Huntlé bankys me for to play.*

If the names 'Gordon' and 'Huntly' somehow have more of the ring of the north-east than of the south-east about them, it is for a very good reason. They were brought from this Berwickshire parish by a Norman family to become their surname and title in the north-east. As Geddie puts it, "In Thomas's time, the head of the family, Sir Adam de Gordon, was Warden of the Marches, and these barons of the Merse, who dispensed justice at the 'Hanging Tree' at Gordon, had already begun to put down roots in Strathbogie and other lands north of the Mounth, their rise being on the ruin of the Comyns, the Cheynes, and other houses planted earlier in the region between Spey and Dee."

He goes on: "A Gordon is still owner of the lands of East Gordon or Greenknowe [in Berwickshire]; and the head of the family in the North, the Duke of Richmond and Gordon, is to this day superior of the lands of Gordon and Westruther [in Berwickshire]. It is hardly an extravagant conjecture that the neighbourhood of Gordon to the Rymour's Tower may explain the abundant traces of Thomas's fame and presence in the counties of Aberdeen and Banff."

Quite so, and Geddie might also have mentioned that the same parish at the same time seems to have produced a man called Bernard de Gordon who was to be one of the great doctors of medieval Europe: his 'Lilium Medicinæ' was translated into many languages, including Gaelic. While Bernard's linguistic skills drew him to France, Thomas's must have been the very ones needed by Sir Adam de Gordon for his New Frontier in the north. Strathbogie, *Srath Balgaidh*, was emphatically Gaelic-speaking territory, with some remnants no doubt of Pictish, and it was only a hundred years since the monks at the abbey of Deer in Buchan had written the foundation legends of their house into a gospel book, thus providing us with the earliest surviving Scottish Gaelic text in what we now know as the Book of Deer. Deer itself is mentioned in one of Thomas's prophecies:

*It isna here, it isna here,  
That ye maun bigg the Kirk o Deer,  
But on the tap o Tillerie  
Where mony a corp must after lie.*

The implication seems to be that Thomas had had a vision of corpses on the top of Tillerie. It may be a reference to the battle of Inverallochy (1308), which Thomas is said to have referred to when John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, called him a liar. Said Thomas:

*Tho' Thomas the Lyar thou callest me,  
A sooth tale I shall tell to thee;  
By Aikey side thy horse shall ride;  
He shall tumble and thou shalt fa',  
And thy neckbane shall brak in twa,  
And dogs shall thy banis gnaw;  
And, maulgre [despite] all thy kin and thee,  
Thy ain belt thy bier shall be.*

The site of Comyn's death, whether in a hunting accident or as a consequence of the battle, is pointed out at Comyn's Craig, on the site of the market stance at Aikey Brae hard by the ruins of the Abbey of Old Deer. And it brings me to my final point. Prophecy — call it 'forecasts' or 'the vision thing' or just 'propaganda' if you like — has always been a handy political weapon. In Thomas's case, Scottish churchmen would happily have agreed to anything, no matter how unorthodox, which built up the seer's credibility when the foundations of the state were under attack. Thomas was already an old man in 1286 when the death of Alexander III

plunged the nation into the crisis from which it did not emerge until Bannockburn was fought and won in 1314. But his 'cult' shows evidence of manipulation, whether during his life or after his death, by the Bruce faction against the Baliols and Comyns, and it is in this context that the prophecies from the south-west (the land of the Bruces) and the north-east (the land of the Comyns, displaced by the Gordons) are of great interest.

In 'The Brus', written about 1375, John Barbour tells us how in 1306 the news of Bruce's murder of the Red Comyn in the Greyfriars' Church at Dumfries was brought to the patriotic Bishop Lamberton at St Andrews. "Sykyrly," says the bishop of Bruce, "I hop Thomas's prophecy / Of Hercildoune, sall verified be / In him; for, so our Lord help me, / I haiff gret hop he sall be King / And haiff this land all in leding."

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